

*Subversion and Ambivalence:
Pacific Islanders on New Zealand Prime
Time*

Sarina Pearson

When representations of Pacific Islanders in mainstream media exist, they have often been negative and marginalizing. Many models for progressive media practice have been proposed by Maaori and Pacific Island filmmakers in New Zealand¹ (Barclay 1995; Mita 1992; Hunter 1995). Yet, real opportunities for Pacific Island communities to present counter-images, express resistance to, or enter into dialogue and "talk back to" historical stereotypes continue to be limited, especially when, and where, Pacific Island media efforts might have the most impact.

The steadily increasing body of analysis and discussion about moving images by and about Pacific Islanders at international conferences² has tended to focus on film as *the* significant site of creative and political expression. More ephemeral forms of popular culture such as television have thus far failed to capture the critical imagination to the same degree as celluloid. Even so, it can be argued in the New Zealand context that populist media such as television provide a forum for the energies of contemporary Pacific Island cultures that feature film has not yet delivered. *Milburn Place* (photo 1), an offbeat and politically incorrect segment on the comedy program *Skitz*, was one example of Pacific Islanders engaging both themselves and the majority culture through prime-time broadcast television.³

The term *Pacific Islander* itself is a complex, ambivalent, and politically charged designation. In New Zealand, *Pacific Islander* most frequently refers to individuals and their descendants who migrated to New Zealand from Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, Tokelau, or Fiji.⁴ The term does not refer to Maaori, who have a distinct status as Aotearoa



PHOTO 1. *Milburn Place* logo. (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)

New Zealand's indigenous people. In the 1996 census, more than two hundred thousand people identified themselves as Pacific Islanders (about 5.4 percent of the population); the median age is twenty, and more than sixty percent live in or around Auckland. Because Samoans constitute over half of the Pacific Island community, the most common cultural expressions of island culture tend to be Samoan. *Milburn Place* reflected this tendency but also included a range of other Pacific Island nationalities via, for example, cameo appearances by Cook Island–Tahitian singer Annie Crummer.

This paper explores how the satirical humor generated by characters on *Milburn Place* rendered them subversive and potentially revolutionary on the one hand, and how on the other, they were reactionary insofar as they reinforced and entrenched the race and class hierarchies in New Zealand that frequently situate Pacific Islanders as an urban underclass. In the oscillation between subversive and reactionary readings, a polysemic bimodality emerged that was both ambivalent and ambiguous in terms of the conditions under which the show was produced, its subject

matter, and its reception. The show incited ambivalence and ambiguity because it straddled a desire on the part of Pacific Islanders to be visible both to themselves and to majority cultures and yet existed within a set of interpretive parameters that complicated its potential reception. These tensions between visibility and stereotype perhaps ultimately reflect the complexities of Pacific Island identities in the New Zealand context.

Skitz debuted in the autumn of 1994 on Friday evenings at 7:30 PM on New Zealand's TV3. Early critical response to the program was not particularly positive. One reviewer in the *New Zealand Listener* described it as "tasteless, offensive and controversial." She suggested, "The team need to stop running around like a bunch of demented . . . escapees from a French farce and let their material get the laughs," and she predicted, "if the *Milburn Place* poke at Polynesian family life isn't up before the race relations conciliator, this isn't New Zealand" (Wichtel 1994, 64). The segment was reviewed by the Broadcasting Standards Authority,⁵ who concluded that the show was satire and as such "not meant to be taken as a serious portrayal of a Pacific Island family, but rather to ridicule the one-dimensional stereotype of a Polynesian" (NZH, 27 Sept 1995, 19).

Reaction from the various sectors of the Samoan community appeared divided. Justine Simeai-Barton, a theatre, film, and video director, felt that the *Milburn* sketches were, "very offensive in [their] portrayal of Polynesians as happy-go-lucky and simple." Evan Charlton, a reporter for the local Pacific Island television magazine program *Tangata Pasifika*, disagreed, asserting that "all his friends enjoy the programme because it reflects their reality" (quoted by Andersen 1995).

Public opinion has been a little harder to gauge. The ratings⁶ suggest that the program's reception was fairly lukewarm (Andersen 1995). *Skitz* was devised to cater to the elusive, yet highly desirable, urban demographic group of fifteen to twenty-five year olds.⁷ Although many of them do not watch television on Friday evenings, detailed audience research by New Zealand on Air (NZOA) and the Gibson Group revealed that *Milburn Place* developed a devoted cult following (Roger Horrocks, personal communication 1997). Internet responses to the show on the *Milburn Place* portion of the *Skitz* website support the audience research, and Dave Armstrong, a senior writer for *Skitz*, suggested that one informal measure of the segment's impact could be gauged from the warm Pacific Island reception accorded *Milburn Place* actor David Fane at local

Wellington rugby matches (personal communication 1998). The show's ratings, while not stellar (and ultimately not adequate to ensure its survival) represented a small, committed constituency of young European and Pacific Island audiences for whom television constituted a site of significant social practice.

The public encounters, negotiations, and struggles over meaning and identity that occur in television (Gray 1995, 133) are shaped in part by the institutional structures and constraints within which shows are developed and distributed. *Skitz* was born out of an unusual set of financial and philosophical circumstances that makes New Zealand broadcasting unique. It was precisely the confluence of commercial broadcast imperatives, a small population, and a residual commitment to a national television culture that is implemented through a modified form of public service broadcasting, that made *Milburn Place* possible in the first place.

In 1994 New Zealand had three national free-to-air channels that, despite considerable government ownership, essentially constituted a commercial⁸ broadcasting system. *Skitz* aired on the only privately owned channel, TV3.⁹ However, vestiges of New Zealand's public service broadcasting past remain. New Zealand on Air is a quasi-autonomous governmental funding agency, supported by the compulsory licensing fee that every household with a television is required to pay. Unlike commercial broadcasters in the United States, whose programs emerge and succeed or fail solely on the strength of their ratings and thus their revenue-generating capabilities, there is supposed to be a "safety net" in the New Zealand system—or what one NZOA board member recently called "an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff" (Horrocks 1997). New Zealand on Air has an explicit mandate to support local and minority production and to evaluate programs based on their ability to deliver social dividends as well as economic ones. Most if not virtually all New Zealand and Pacific Island projects that make it to air, including *Milburn Place* and *Skitz*, have substantial financial subsidies from New Zealand on Air (NZOA 1994, 1995, 1996).

Is this hybrid system perhaps the best of both worlds? Competition and subsidy coexisting for the benefit of all? Not exactly. Even with NZOA funding, local content rarely exceeds twenty percent of total broadcast hours, a proportion that is low compared to other "developed" nations. New Zealand on Air cannot compel broadcasters to air projects. Even if it picks up the entire tab for a program, a broadcaster can and has refused to air it on the basis that while artistically or socially worthy, such shows

fail to attract “sufficient” advertising and therefore “cost” the broadcaster the “opportunity” to generate much-needed revenue. The situation becomes much more dire if one attempts to air a niche program in prime time, when advertising potential is at a premium. At best New Zealand on Air can only lobby broadcasters, who ultimately determine what programs air and when. Therefore, commercial imperatives enter the “public service” equation and affect the types of work that minority filmmakers are able to make. This system of funding and broadcast favors programs with strong populist appeal. So, despite a system of subsidies designed to protect “strategic nationalisms” (Horrocks 1995), commercial imperatives still tip the balance in favor of mainstream products, “accessibility,” and ratings.

Similar issues about audience size and constituency arose for the landmark African American¹⁰ sketch comedy program *In Living Color*, although it was situated in a strictly commercial system and in a nation with comparatively huge minority audiences. Norma Schulman observed that *In Living Color*’s “often hard-hitting satire [seemed] to appeal to white as well as black audiences. [It was] double edged enough to allow viewers with different orientations to tailor its message to their own particular perceptions of the racial climate. . . . *Its ambiguity [gave] it bimodal appeal*—a quality deemed all important in a commercial medium for whom the aggregate minority viewing audience [was] insufficient in itself to garner the kind of ratings that yield substantial revenue” (Schulman 1992, 2; emphasis added).

Milburn Place, like *In Living Color*, used comedy that negotiated between widely divergent interpretive positions as a means for its very survival. Arguably, the very nature of television is ambiguous and polysemic, and perhaps more so for local series in New Zealand, since no single viewing constituency will provide a sufficient aggregate audience in a country of 3.6 million people. But *Milburn Place* and *In Living Color* negotiated a bimodality that was specifically racial. When explaining the popular appeal and commercial success of *In Living Color*, sociologist Herman Gray, who has written extensively about the program, asserted that “it [was] the show’s transgressive use of the trope of race that [allowed] it to reconfigure audiences that [were] differently positioned socially. If this crossover appeal [was] the source of celebration, it [was] also the source of considerable angst and criticism” (1995, 131). *Milburn Place* clearly generated a similar set of sentiments. As demonstrated by reactions from Pacific Island media workers, the show’s interpretation

was by no means fixed, nor was there anything approaching consensus on its essential reading.

Not all Pacific Island programs in New Zealand are bimodal in an explicitly racial manner. But, as will become evident, those shows that do not negotiate ethnic ambiguity, while artistically and socially valuable, exist under a set of constraints that ultimately inhibit their impact among young Pacific Islanders. Two significant series that feature Pacific Island themes and narratives as well as casts and key creative personnel are *Tangata Pasifika* and *Tala Pasifika*.

Tangata Pasifika has been the most stable and consistent Pacific Island broadcast presence in New Zealand television over the past decade. Aimed at a broad cross section of the Pacific Island community, the weekly half-hour magazine program features Pacific Islanders both in front of and behind the camera. Stories tend to focus on local cultural events and profile the achievements of individuals. New Zealand on Air has completely subsidized the program over the last seven years (Roger Horrocks, personal communication 1997). The catch? *Tangata Pasifika* airs on TV1 at 9:30 on Sunday morning, not exactly a prime-time slot—Sunday mornings have noncommercial status by government decree. Therefore, broadcasters tend to ghettoize shows that have good public relations potential but negligible “bottom line” returns during this time. In addition to *Tangata Pasifika*, Maaori programs such as *Marae* and *Waka Huia* air on Sunday morning. However, none of this really matters insofar as *Tangata Pasifika*’s core television constituency is most likely to be attending church on Sunday morning.

Tala Pasifika, which consisted of six short dramas (*Brown Sugar*, *Hibiscus*, *Day in the Life*, *Malama*, *The Cat’s Crying*, *Talk of the Town*) written and directed by young Pacific Islanders, was another significant moment for Polynesian television. The series was designed to develop young writing talent and nurture a Pacific Island moving-image production community. The short films reflect the New Zealand-born Pacific Island experience and were geared to a young audience who were contemporaneous with many of the series’ writers. New Zealand on Air and the New Zealand Film Commission Short Film Fund provided funding for the series, but no broadcaster would schedule it. Eventually, *Tala Pasifika* aired as part of *Tangata Pasifika* on Sunday morning—once again, at a time when viewers of any description are few and far between, and when the targeted audience, which in this case would be similar to *Milburn Place*’s audience, had other priorities.

The key to mainstream visibility is the 6:00 to 10:00 PM slot, otherwise known as prime time. These are the hours when most New Zealanders habitually watch television, when the stakes are highest for broadcasters, and when shows have greatest impact. When asked about representation on television, a class at Porirua College in Wellington that had about an eighty percent Pacific Island constituency said, “‘we don’t see ourselves on television at all.’ They mentioned *Tangata Pasifika* . . . and Sam¹¹ on *Shortland Street*. But they felt that Pacific Islanders were largely ignored” (Wake 1994, 29). If media coverage is “the new barometer of power and status in mass society” (Schulman 1994, 109), it doesn’t take much insight to conclude that Pacific Islanders are largely disempowered. Broadcasters fail to see Pacific Islanders as consumers, and consequently the public fails to see them at all. A second season of *Tala Pasifika* was slow tracked precisely because broadcasters cited prohibitive “opportunity costs” when negotiating conditions for the first series. It is in this climate of highly competitive television that *Milburn Place* aired, one of the only places, besides the immensely popular and highly rated show *Crimewatch*,¹² where Pacific Island faces figured at all in prime time.

Milburn Place segments ranged from five to seven minutes. They featured a regular cast of characters including the Semisi family, which consisted of Pisupo,¹³ the hapless, unemployed, and strangely infantile father; his hard-working wife Sia, played by Maaori character actor Hori Ahipene in drag; Tusi, the eldest daughter, enrolled at university with high grades and hip, urban Polynesian fashion sense; and her younger brother Lagi, a perennial high school student whose greatest achievement was that he had been drafted for a local rugby team, the Auckland Colts. Sue was Lagi’s *palagi*¹⁴ girlfriend, who embodied the bleeding-heart liberal and had “wannabe” tendencies. The Minister (never given a name) constantly demanded financial assistance and displayed an unsettling lechery. Occasionally, a variety of other characters were introduced, such as cousins from “the islands,” Lagi’s rugby mates, council functionaries, and repo¹⁵ men.

The sketches took place in the living room of the Semisis’ Otara flat. Otara is an economically depressed suburb south of Auckland with a large Polynesian population. The segments crafted narratives using local events and incidents¹⁶ as well as culturally distinctive motifs such as *fa’afafine*.¹⁷ The humor was broad and parodic, using physical slapstick as well as pun, double entendre, and plenty of sexual innuendo. Each segment closed with a homily.

Skitz was written by a multicultural collective. While the program emphasized its social irreverence and ability to offend everyone equally, regardless of gender, race, or religion,¹⁸ the production company behind the show was very careful to point out that its comedy originated from members of the groups that were lampooned. Significantly, two of the three *Listener* articles about *Skitz* mentioned this point, both in reference to the show generally: "You notice that those who make jokes about Maaori and Pacific Islanders are Maaori and Pacific Islanders" (Matthews 1996, 27), and about *Milburn Place* specifically: "the youngest members of the writing team for *Skitz*, . . . are just eighteen, Samoan, and fresh out of high school" (Wake 1994, 28).

In Living Color used a similar, although much more explicit, approach. "Although the cast [was] racially mixed, the viewer [was] reminded at the opening of each show (where Keenan Ivory Wayans or one of the many talented members of his black production team [was] introduced to the audience and appear[ed] on camera) that this was to be a half-hour of jokes about African Americans . . . written and produced by African Americans. This fact [made] a difference in the way the humor [was] to be interpreted" (Schulman 1992, 3). An insider's perspective was critically important for rendering the comedy as funny rather than letting it be perceived as an aggressive racial attack. The ethnicity of the creative personnel in *Milburn Place*, in this case young Samoans, affected how audiences interpreted the show's humor. Whether or not the segment was considered funny, let alone potentially subversive, was contingent to some degree on whether or not the audience accepted that the show was genuinely Pacific Islanders laughing at caricatures of themselves.

In addition to extensive research among young Pacific Islanders, the Gibson Group, which produced *Skitz*, hired four young Samoans as "storyliners" to help with the conceptual development of the show. Irene Anderson implied that the storyliners might just have been good public relations, although she conceded that in her research she wasn't able to "establish to what extent the 'storyliners' concepts [were] reproduced in the programme" (1995). Whether or not *Milburn Place* sketches were genuine in the sense that they were by and about Pacific Islanders was important, but not necessarily crucial, to the show's subversive potential. Because the show did not position itself as explicitly as *In Living Color*, many viewers may not have critically deconstructed the premise or context out of which the humor was generated. For those viewers who felt that the sketches were progressive and "authentic" in some sense, the

humor and style of the show may have rung true enough that regardless of the “real” conditions under which the program was constructed, the show retained its potentially subversive power.

Traditionally, comedy has been considered a potentially liberating moment, when hierarchies are inverted and the unspeakable can be said with relative impunity. Mikhail Bakhtin, referring to pre-Lenten revelries during the High Middle Ages, called it carnivalesque (quoted by Stam 1989, 86). Vilsoni Hereniko (1995) and Caroline Sinavaiana (1992), among others, have explored the social role of ritual clowning throughout Polynesia along similar lines. “In the Pacific, clowning tends to occur whenever individuals gather for celebrations of one kind or another. Those who are sufficiently excited may suddenly jump up and, with gay abandon, dance in a ludicrous manner—wagging hips, parodying someone, flirting with another, rolling on the floor, or generally behaving in a manner intended to cause laughter” (Hereniko 1995, 143).

Milburn Place has been described as an electronic version of the Samoan *fale aitu* (Wake 1994, 29), where traditionally, “satirical sketches . . . commonly serve as interludes between sets of songs and dances in a traditional program of entertainment. . . . Caricature, hyperbole, and satire characterize plots that often turn on the ridicule of authority figures. In the sketches, normative status roles are reversed: the high are made low and the world momentarily ‘turned upside down’, as are found in carnival traditions elsewhere” (Sinavaiana 1992, 202). The novelist Albert Wendt agreed that there are “links with *faleitu*” but he also cited important differences such as the show’s slapstick, which was generally much broader than the subtler forms of parody used traditionally (Andersen 1995). Perhaps one sense in which *Milburn Place* and *fale aitu* are similar is their incisive sociopolitical satire. Both forms appear to address serious, complex, and highly charged issues in the community.

In her description of famous, or rather infamous, *fale aitu* sketches, Sinavaiana observed that, “more often than not political themes (simply) and perpetually lurk in the wings. In fact, the essence of *fale aitu* is political, its very fabric being woven from fibers of social commentary” (1992, 205). *Fale aitu* sketches, although a traditional form of folk comedy, are still highly topical and fairly current. Parallels can be drawn between folk comedy and *Milburn Place*, especially in some of the ways *fale aitu* negotiate contemporary Samoan issues. “As Western cultural systems continue to permeate the soil of social life in Samoa, countless points of cross-cultural difference and tension continually crop up. . . .

Comic sketches highlight the cracks and fissures of that social topography with satire and wit; the artful pun, a well-placed twitch, a Samoan Elvis singing about the sorry sight of Christian ministers squabbling over the most prestigious cuts of roast pig. Tectonic plates of social order have shifted beneath our feet; and traditional comedy is a plank bridge flung across the rifts and faultlines of that only half-familiar terrain" (Sinavaiana 1992, 205). In many respects, *Milburn Place* intensively mined this theme of "unfamiliar" and shifting terrain. Adapting "island" social systems, values, relationships, economies, and hierarchies to New Zealand society continually stresses the social fabric both within local Samoan communities and at their interface with "majority" cultures. The show's subversive potential may have been greatest at this particular interface between traditional and contemporary, home and New Zealand, then and now.

Both *Milburn Place* and *fale aitu* achieve comedy and humor through parody and satire that invert the social universe, thereby recontextualizing social relations in a clearly ludicrous fashion. Oppression, injustice, and alienation are revealed as somehow arbitrary constructs of a universe that is neither fair nor governable by individual will. These inversions serve to comment on tragic phenomena such as unemployment, poverty, limited social mobility, crushing economic and social obligations, crime, sexual politics, gender, and racism.

Milburn Place began by inverting familial and social hierarchies. The voice of authority and moral rectitude was not Pisupo's but those of his children, Tusi and Lagi. At every turn, the children commented on Pisupo's inability to provide for his family and pointed out his failures to effectively prevail over the minutiae of everyday life (eg, the power bill). In one episode, his low status in the family was made much more explicit when Pisupo was hired at the Burger Bar, where Lagi turned out to be his supervisor. Matters deteriorated when Lagi was ordered to fire his father or face the sack himself. "Graciously," Pisupo offered to resign and "go back to being an unemployed failure."

In other representations of Pacific Island familial life such as the *Tala Pasifika* short film *Talk of the Town* (1995), fathers clearly have high status within the family. In another short film, *O Tamaiti* (1996), the father is represented as a shadowy, faceless figure,¹⁹ who delegates much domestic responsibility to his eldest son, Tino, because, it is implied, he is generally absent—presumably working long hours to provide for his family. In these films, while there is an ambivalence about familial hierarchy

(more so in *O Tamaiti* than in *Talk of the Town*), the relationship of deference and respect between children and their fathers is clearly demonstrated. In the carnivalesque tradition, *Milburn Place* turns this relationship on its head, with Pisupo demanding the least respect of all the characters.

The show also took the church, traditionally an important and esteemed institution in the Pacific Island community, and positioned it at the bottom end of the moral spectrum. Whenever the minister arrived, the Semisis could be sure they would be poorer, one way or another. For example, in one segment, Sia came home from sixteen hours of cleaning. Lagi and Sue suggested that she take some time off, but she worried that without her income there wouldn't be enough money to buy the minister's birthday present. Meanwhile, the minister had "helpfully" sent the Semisis a catalogue of golf paraphernalia and home entertainment units. Of course, all of these items were far beyond their means, and Sia predicted the embarrassment they would feel when it was revealed in church that all they could afford to give was their last tin of corned beef, which it turned out Pisupo had already sampled (photo 2). Implementing his usual resolution to fiscal crisis, Pisupo gallantly offered to go and play the ponies with his last two dollars in order to raise money for the present. Shortly thereafter, the minister arrived and inquired whether or not they had received his "pussy"logue by which he meant "cat"alogue. In many sketches, the minister would make sexually explicit verbal puns of questionable taste. Sue tried to divert his attention by suggesting that Sia give him a song for his birthday. The minister was unimpressed and emphasized how little Sue really understood the economic dimension of Pacific Island churchgoing when he testily replied, "Very nice, but you can't play golf with a song, *palagi*" (photo 3). Desperate, Sia launched into a sultry rendition of "Happy Birthday" in the style of Marilyn Monroe (photo 4). The minister, spying a handy vacuum nozzle (photo 5), shot it up her skirts, making her Mother Hubbard fly into the air just as Marilyn Monroe's white skirt did in *The Seven Year Itch*, except that in this case Sia revealed a full-length lavalava underneath (photo 6). Dissatisfied, the minister threatened to expose their poverty in church. In a last-ditch attempt to satisfy him, Sia grabbed a school-owned camcorder out of Lagi's hands and gave it to the minister. As the minister read the security engraving on the side of the camera, "Property of South Auckland College," and mused aloud that he had several of the same "brand" at home, Lagi grabbed the camera and substituted Pisupo's videocassette



PHOTO 2. "Last tin of corned beef!" (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 3. "Can't play golf with a song!" (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 4. "Happy Birthday to You." (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 5. "Hmmm. . . ." (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 6. "Oooh!" (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 7. "We've been visited by burglars!" (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 8. "You must think of the present!" (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)

recorder for it. Finally appeased, the minister left with his present, chuckling that he would use it to watch Manu Samoa win the Rugby World Cup. Pisupo returned home, having lost his two dollars, to find his beloved machine gone. "We've been visited by burglars" he lamented (photo 7). To which Sia replied, "Worse, we've been visited by the minister." The segment ended with the minister offering the homily, "If you want a good future in the church, you must worry about the present" (photo 8).

Again, other films by and about Samoans stress the primary role of the church in local community life. *Malama* (1995), *Talk of the Town*, and *O Tamaiti* all have either sequences located physically in the church, or strong references to the church. In each case, the church is treated with deference and respect, in direct contrast to its representation in *Milburn Place*.

There are of course many readings, many layers, and many interpretive paths within any visual text. *Milburn Place*'s bimodal nature ensured that at least two contradictory readings of domestic and religious life were likely. Certainly, part of the viewing audience (indeed, maybe a lot of it),

walked away from the show thinking that what they had just seen was parodic and stereotypic but essentially reflective of certain truths about Samoan domestic and religious life. For this audience, the program challenged little and confirmed every generalization and negative stereotype perpetuated in the popular press. In this sense the program was hardly subversive. Instead it reinforced a reactionary reading of the show, a response that I would imagine worried Samoans, because it entrenched racial inequity and would have had very real consequences in their daily lives.

But for another portion of the audience, who were either Samoans or Pacific Islanders themselves, or whose ethnic and social antennae were adjusted at a slightly different frequency, the inversion of daily relationships pointed to some very serious tensions. Parody provided a context for issues that were difficult to verbalize.

Tamara Rawitt, a producer for *In Living Color*, explicitly identified the political potential of racial parody in a way that relates to the subversive potential of *Milburn Place*: "The humor can work on a very subliminal level, and it is saying a lot of unsayable things. . . . However prevalent racism is, it's still a taboo topic. But through comedy, we're cleverly allowing certain things to come through. We're saying it still exists" (quoted in Gray 1995, 135).

Pisupo's unemployment may have been the butt of *Milburn Place* one-liners, but his character drew attention to the issue of disproportionate and chronic unemployment among Pacific Islanders, especially Pacific Island men. Unemployment among Pacific Islanders was nearly 21 percent in 1994, when the show went to air; unemployment for *palagi* during the same period was about 5 percent (Barber 1995, 26). Joblessness—or its converse, long hard hours for poor pay—shifts family dynamics, especially when children are all too aware that fathers in other ethnic groups often provide very different economic opportunities for their families. Ben Taufua, a community social worker in south Auckland commented: "These are men who provided for their families in their own country, who worked the land. They came here and what do they have? Nothing" (quoted in Heal 1995, 138).

The minister likewise highlighted local ambivalence about the church. Although it provides many important social functions for the community, the church has also been criticized for fund-raising practices that undermine the health and welfare of its parishioners, many of whom are already committed to sending remittances to family back home.

The tension between value systems was usually pointed out by Lagi, who tended to voice New Zealand-born Samoan critiques, while Sia, his mother, tended to represent more traditional values. On the one hand Lagi objected to giving the “rich minister” any more money, even at the risk of losing face when the minister’s birthday presents were announced in church and it was revealed that the Semisis, lacking any funds, failed to buy him a lavish “labor saving device.” On the other hand, his mother considered how she might procure the present, even if it meant she had to work much harder or offer the minister the last of her family’s food. When Lagi objected to sending remittances back to Samoa, Sia reminded him of the taro blight. When he truculently asked, “Who cares?” she beamed him with a large taro. In many ways, son and mother represented most clearly the tension between life lived “here” and “there.”

The interface between the Samoan–New Zealand community and *palagi* society was also fraught with tension and parody. Sue, Lagi’s *palagi* girlfriend, was the most prominent European in the sketch. Others emerged periodically, such as the two unattractive repo men who came for the stereo system, Lagi’s rugby mates who wanted to date his *fa’afafine* cousin, and the council health inspector who complained about the *umu*²⁰ in the backyard.

The repo-men segment opened with Tusi and Lagi dancing in front of the new stereo. Pisupo interrupted them, demanding that they tune in to the races so he could check up on one of his bets. Shortly after, two small, seedy *palagi* repo men arrived. Pisupo and the kids tried to thwart them by pretending not to speak English, but Sia entered (photo 9), wielding her rather large slipper, and put an end to their ploy (photo 10). At this point it was revealed that the money Pisupo gambled on the horse was in fact a payment for the stereo, which the repo men began to take out the door. In the meantime, it transpired that Pisupo’s favorite horse, *Royal Hangover*, had somehow just won, giving him a hundred-dollar windfall (photo 11). Sia pledged the money to the repo men and sent them on their way with a “Get out, no good *palagi*! Shoo! Shoo!”

In the council-health-inspector segment, Sia discovered that the electricity had been cut off, and when she tried to call the electric company the phone line was dead, because Pisupo had once again blown the power and phone money at the track. Resourcefully, he suggested that an *umu* in the backyard would solve the immediate problem of cooking dinner. Unfortunately, Max Telford, the cranky *palagi* council officer, arrived to



PHOTO 9. Sia and the repo men. (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 10. Sia with the slipper. (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 11. Royal Hangover wins. (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)

put an end to things (photo 12). He said, "Listen, we've had complaints about smoke coming from your backyard, and we know that with you type of people, where there's smoke, there's usually an *umu*" (photo 13). To which Pisupo indignantly replied, "We wouldn't use such primitive cooking techniques!" Unluckily for the Semisis, Max opened the back door and was literally driven back by profuse black smoke billowing in. Sternly he said, "Unlicensed *umu* shelters are illegal under council by-law 3C clause 9 of the Papatoetoe We Don't Want Polynesians in Our Neighbourhood Act. Either you buy a permit for that fancy little oven of yours or you could face a two-hundred-thousand-dollar fine or up to six years in prison." As Max prepared to leave, Tusi asked him "How come you don't need to buy a permit for a *palagi* barbecue?" As his parting shot, Max snickered, "Well, they're a better class of smoke."

Like Pisupo and the minister, the *palagi* characters were inverted and exaggerated. In each case, the *palagi* were physically diminutive and, although vested in bureaucratic authority, appeared inconsequential. Their characterizations in *Milburn Place* were consistently divested of any real power to repossession property or to put the *umu* out.

Sue was a rather plain, pudgy girl who articulated a line of liberal

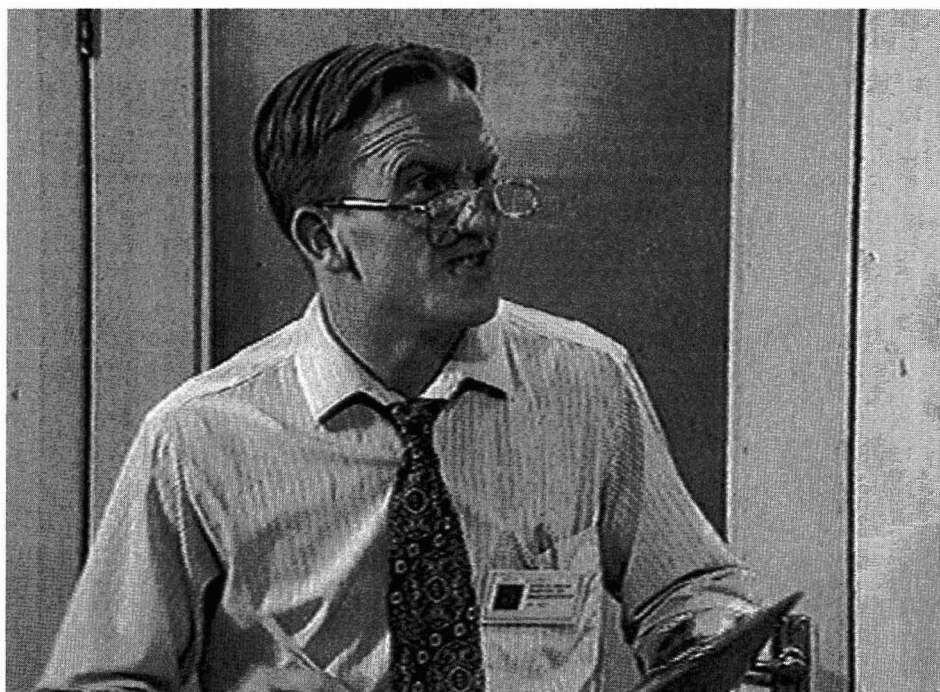


PHOTO 12. Council Inspector Max Telford. (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)



PHOTO 13. "We know that with you type of people, where there's smoke there's usually an *umu*." (Courtesy of the Gibson Group)

thinking that would be humorously and consistently rejected by the more conservative Semisis, who usually terminated her ruminations with a "Shut up, *palagi*!" In one sense she represented a continuation of the sketch's inverse carnivalesque universe, where high was low, powerful was disempowered, and the meaningful rendered trivial. As an inverse symbol of European society, Sue had no economic power, because her mother had thrown her out of her posh eastern-suburb home for dating Lagi. Her liberal rhetoric was viewed as unhelpful platitude rather than genuine social conscience.

In another sense, Sue's character pointed to the ambivalent dynamics between Samoan and *palagi* economically, socially, and sexually. The short film *Brown Sugar* (1995) tackled the same theme, of a tendency for young Samoan men to go out with "trophy" European girlfriends. In *Brown Sugar*, a triangle was created between a *palagi* woman who was a talent agent, a young Samoan man whom she tried to recruit for a television ad, and a young Samoan woman who was interested in the young man but failed to "compete" for his attention. However, the young Samoan woman had the last laugh, when she prevailed artistically as part of an all-girl singing group. *Brown Sugar* was humorous but not parodic. It represented strong ambivalence about power dynamics in interracial relationships. In *Milburn Place*, Sue was an unlikely "trophy" girlfriend, but several scenes revealed the same sort of ambivalence. For example, Pisupo recommended that Lagi wait until Sue went home before flirting with other women, and he dismissed Lagi's request for date money, by asserting that Sue was *palagi*, therefore she could afford it.

Many other axes, inversions, and points of subversion were depicted, but parents, religion, and relationships were probably some of the most central to the show's target demographic group aged between fifteen and twenty-five. One way of looking at *Milburn Place* is that it was potentially subversive because it raised difficult issues and cast them in manageable terms. Faceless bureaucracies that caused much anxiety and stress, such as the power company, the council, and the stereo shop, were diminished to the point that they could be laughed at.

The other way of looking at the comedy in *Milburn Place* is that it maintained the status quo, not because it entrenched historic stereotypes (which it arguably did), but once the issues had been raised and a little steam let off, nothing substantial needed to happen. Folk comedy such as *fale aitu* has been characterized as reaffirming social hierarchies rather than challenging them. "Bakhtin . . . noted that carnival laughter in

European traditions rarely challenges the ruling elite, who allow themselves to be mocked, knowing full well that come the following morning, they will be 'more firmly entrenched' in their privileged positions" (Hereniko 1995, 163). Certainly, the commercial and social environment of broadcast television lends itself to this critique insofar as social criticism "permitted" by the media establishment could hardly be critical at all. On the Saturday morning after *Milburn Place*, would anything have really changed? No, but in an optimistic moment one might be able to embrace William Mitchell's assertion that clowning's "power is in mockingly chipping away at the culture, acting as a political accessory to temporal social transformation" (quoted in Hereniko 1995, 163).

Subversive, reactionary, or somewhere in between? Writing about *In Living Color*, Gray suggested that part of "what the show signifies in its representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality is necessarily contingent and indeterminate. For some, the show's strategies of representation produce critical insights; for others they produce representations that are dangerous and embarrassing. In the end, the show's meanings depend on how it organizes its audiences and negotiates the discourses, debates and circumstances that enable and constantly reposition it within the larger society" (1995, 146). Certainly, the Semis forced viewers to look for an elusive and shifting interpretive frame. But an important difference between the two programs is illustrated by their televisual context.

When asked about *Milburn Place*'s humorous but essentially negative portrayal of Pacific Islanders, David Armstrong offered the following defense: "It's not a perfect family. It'd be easier to be like the *Cosby Show*, where he's a black doctor and all the kids wear great sweaters. But if you go to South Auckland or Porirua, you'll find a lot of families that have problems" (quoted in Wake 1994, 29).

The mediascape (Appadurai 1990) in which *Milburn Place* was situated has no parallel in the *Cosby Show* and virtually no prime-time programs feature the Polynesian middle class or fantasies of that middle class. Whereas *In Living Color* was juxtaposed against and implicated in the cultural politics of the *Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Frank's Place*, *Arsenio Hall*, and *Oprah*, to name only a few; *Milburn Place* existed in virtual isolation except for the occasional *Shortland Street* character. It did not function like *In Living Color* as a counterpoint and commentary on the representation of Samoans on television; in many respects it *was* the representation of Samoans on television. Consequently, its ambivalence was in many respects amplified. On

the one hand its very presence subverted the institutional invisibility of Pacific Islanders on prime-time television, and on the other, it was reactionary because it was one of only a handful of representations of Pacific Islanders on prime-time television.

In the final analysis, *Milburn Place* negotiated a complex discourse in a contingent and fluctuating manner that allowed for multiple and simultaneous interpretations depending on who the audience was at any given time. Subversive, reactionary, and ambivalent possibilities reveal the complexities of Pacific Island representation in mainstream media. Ultimately, *Milburn Place*'s subversive potential lay not only in its very existence but also in its capacity to diminish the prevalent Polynesian stereotype by doing the hardest thing of all—laughing at it.

Notes

1 To date, Maaori filmmakers have been much more active than Pacific Islanders in publishing and theorizing about media practice. However, Maaori work on media theory and praxis, as well as instrumental industry figures such as Don Selwyn who produced the *Tala Pasifika* short film series for television, have had significant effect on Pacific Island filmmakers in New Zealand.

2 For example, "Featuring Paradise: Representing Pacific Islanders in Film and Video," the Twenty-Second Annual University of Hawai'i Pacific Islands Studies Conference, November 1997.

3 *Skitz* was a half-hour program that consisted of a number of comedy sketches (much like *Saturday Night Live*). New Zealand television does not have "seasons" like US television. *Skitz* was broadcast sporadically in chunks, but for the most part it aired on Friday nights in the early evening. *Milburn Place* was originally a component of *Skitz*, but later went on to become a situation comedy called *The Semisis*. It was commissioned in late 1997 or early 1998 and finally went to air on three consecutive Thursday nights in December 1998.

4 Cook Islanders, Niueans, and Tokelauans automatically qualify for New Zealand citizenship (Samasoni 1990).

5 The Broadcasting Standards Authority is a national body that formally reviews viewer complaints.

6 As Ang (1991) pointed out, ratings are a difficult beast, but as in most places, New Zealand broadcasters regard them as indicative of a show's success—and they are a measure of economic success—but, as became evident in the case of *Milburn Place*, ratings don't gauge the social impact of a show. For example, *Milburn Place* characters were featured at the 1997 annual public Christmas pageant in Auckland and are arguably recognizable even among people who did

not see them on *Skitz*. The *Skitz* website (<http://www.skitz.co.nz/>) has also been quite successful.

7 The reasoning is that this group has a disproportionate amount of cash and consumes ephemeral products (Coke, jeans, running shoes, compact disks) at a relatively rapid rate. Because television broadcasters are not in the business of selling programs but of delivering audiences to their advertising clients, they too become obsessive about the youth market.

8 In this case "commercial" broadcasting refers to a network that relies on advertising as its primary source of revenue. New Zealand has cable television in the form of Rupert Murdoch's SKY TV. Programming on SKY is primarily produced overseas with the exception of major sporting events such as rugby football.

9 TV3 is owned by a consortium, but essentially run by the Canadian media company CanWest, which is headquartered in Toronto. Since mid-1997, CanWest has expanded into the New Zealand market with a fourth free-to-air national channel.

10 Comparisons with *In Living Color* and African American culture resonate on several levels in the New Zealand context. Specifically, *In Living Color* and programs like it aired on New Zealand television and form part of the cultural context in which shows like *Milburn Place* exist. Also, African American television, music, and fashion are popular among Pacific Island and Maaori youth. While there is deep-seated ambivalence about identifications with African American cultural forms (especially intergenerationally), experiences of alienation and marginalization form one axis of identification (Crosbie 1993), while dynamism and improvisational potential (Mitchell 1996) form another. While African American popular culture exists in a multicultural setting, New Zealand has invoked biculturalism between Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) and Maaori, which has effectively disenfranchised a number of ethnic minorities in New Zealand.

11 Sam was a popular Samoan character on the highly rated local nightly soap opera, *Shortland Street*. Since Sam in the mid-1990s, there have been a range of other Pacific Island faces on prime time. Sports and sportscasting are where many Pacific Islanders are visible. There were several prominent characters on *Shortland Street* and in drama serials such as *City Life*. However, as of late 1998 local drama serials such as *City Life* were defunct, and *Shortland Street* seems to have shifted away from Pacific Island characters at a time when it is no longer supported by New Zealand on Air.

12 *Crimewatch* consistently ranked highly. The current version of the program, called *New Zealand Insurance Crimescene*, typically rates in the top twenty shows.

13 In Samoan, *pisupo* means "corned beef" (Mosel and So'o 1997).

14 European.

15 *Repo* (pronounced reepo) is an abbreviation of *repossession*. The “repo man” is a person who retrieves property bought on credit or hire-purchase after payments lapse.

16 Local events such as the Porirua Council requiring expensive licenses for backyard *umus*.

17 *Fa'afafine* is often translated as a “man who behaves like a woman” (Mosel and So'o 1997).

18 *Skitz* targeted a wide range of ethnic and social groups including liberals, Asians, yuppies, rural people, and so on.

19 The mother is represented in a similar way.

20 An *umu* is an earthen oven.

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Skitz

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Tangata Pasifika

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Waka Huia

1988–present. 1 hour. Auckland: Television New Zealand.

Abstract

Representations of Pacific Islanders in film and mainstream media have often been negative and marginalizing. Opportunities for Pacific Island communities to present counter images, express resistance, or enter into dialogue with these stereotypes have been limited. However, some instances of resistance have emerged recently, not on film but on broadcast television in New Zealand. Because the “small screen” is less capital-intensive than film, and because public service broadcasting provides some support for minority programming in New Zealand, television is a significant instrument through which Pacific Islanders counteract hegemony. The sketch *Milburn Place* was one instance in which television comedy could be potentially subversive insofar as it made Samoans “visible” on the New Zealand mediascape. It provided a forum in which to critique

social inequality and racial intolerance as well as celebrate an emerging New Zealand Samoan identity. This paper discusses and documents how *Milburn Place* used carnivalesque strategies to disempower stereotypes and to raise serious sociopolitical issues in a "safe" arena. However, the nature of comedy, and parody in particular, ensures that multiple and contradictory interpretations occur. Ultimately, *Milburn Place* negotiated an ambivalent path between subversive and reactionary readings, under the exigencies imposed by commercial television and New Zealand's majority culture.

KEYWORDS: Aotearoa New Zealand, comedy, *Milburn Place*, Pacific Islands, Samoans, television